DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 207 026 CS 006 276

AUTHOR Braswell, Nell
TITLE Following Written Directions: A Survival Skill.
PUB DATE Nov 80
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Regional Conference of the International Reading Association (6th, Norfolk, VA, November 12-15, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; *Comprehension; Reading; Study Skills; Teacher Effectiveness
IDENTIFIERS *Directions; *Instructions

ABSTRACT

The ability to follow directions is a survival skill in today's society, but because many teachers have received little training in how to give clear directions they tend to provide little classroom instruction in how to follow directions. There appear to be four major hindrances to following directions: (1) the directions were either not read or not heard, (2) comprehension of directions is limited, (3) the directions were given poorly, and (4) students expect to have the directions repeated. These hindrances can be alleviated by setting the stage for listening--getting children's attention and refusing assignments for which the directions were not followed; by giving children careful guidance on how to follow directions and assisting with unfamiliar vocabulary in written directions; by choosing the appropriate method for giving the instructions (oral, written, demonstrated, and pictorial); and by letting students know that the directions will not be given and explained over and over. Finally, a written copy should back up all oral instructions that are to be followed at a later time or day. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED207026

FOLLOWING WRITTEN DIRECTIONS: A SURVIVAL SKILL

Nell Braswell

The ability to follow and give clear directions is a skill which is necessary throughout life--beginning with the first one and two step oral directions to the toddler (pick up your toys and put them in the closet) to the complicated directions we must follow in operating that new classroom equipment. Yet, as important as the skill is:

- Teachers have received little training in how to give clear directions; therefore,
- they have tended to provide little direct classroom instruction in how to follow directions.

As we pursue "Following Written Directions" we will:

1. Examine Hindrances to following directions
2. Explore ways to overcome these hindrances
3. Develop good techniques in giving directions.

Let's begin with a definition of what is meant by following directions ". . . a series of steps when accurately given and when followed correctly should result in reaching a given goal." The goal might be tying shoes, riding a bicycle, or completing an assignment.

The ability to follow directions is a survival skill in today's society. We need this skill to fill out forms as indicated, take tests that will be scored by computers, and even to obtain relief from our aches and pains. Have you tried to open a medicine bottle lately? Directions such as line up the arrows, using your thumb push up as you twist the cap to the left. That's complicated and requires following directions, left to right knowledge, and comprehension at least to the application level. Following these directions is compounded by an urgent need to relieve our headache. Can this situation be similar to what a student might feel when following directions on a test?

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Nell Braswell

CS006276

The ability to give clear directions using the appropriate form is a classroom management skill. Have you ever given directions to a group of children in a classroom--asked if they understood--have them nod in agreement. Then gone to another group only to have the entire first group at your elbow--"What are we to do!?" "I don't understand!" The result is utter disaster.

What the students were doing is called passive listening. To avoid this happening we must get the children's attention and get interaction started. In other words, get the students actively involved with the task to be accomplished.

There appears to be four major hindrances to following directions.

I. Directions were neither read nor heard
As teachers we tend to foster this habit when we:

1. begin oral directions before getting children "set" to listening. Tutolo's article. Language Arts (January 1979) suggests that we set the stage for listening by getting children's attention, lessening noise level, using "advance organizers," and getting students to focus on the task. This requires prior teacher planning and getting children to think ahead. This takes a little more time at first but saves much time when children don't ask for directions to be repeated.

2. accept papers in which directions were not followed. This can be a dangerous habit to let develop. Computer scored tests won't interpret "Johnny knew the answer he just carelessly marked incorrectly."

There are situations in which students didn't want to follow directions as given--so ignored them. This problem is not the ability to follow the directions but a behavior problem or a task problem or both.

II. Limited Comprehension of Directions
There are several ways to help children overcome this hindrance.

1. Help them to identify words which are frequently used in directions.

   Helen Newcastle has such a list of words frequently used in written directions (would apply also to oral) in her article "Children's Problems with Written Directions." The Reading Teacher, December 1974.

As a teacher you might have your students compile a list of words they find or hear or see in directions.

Not only identify the words but be certain that they understand the various ways the words may be used.

A study was conducted by Wilson in which a comparison was made between the vocabulary used in written directions (using workbooks of basal readers) and what had been taught in the basal. Wilson found that the workbooks used more difficult vocabulary than the basals. Were the students' inability to perform workbook tasks due to the more difficult vocabulary?

2. Give them direct instruction in how to follow directions.

   Take a set of directions. Have children read them. Then discuss.
   How many steps are there? (If numbered, this is easy)
   How did you know when a new step began? (Then, Now, Next, Also)
   Direct teaching of how to follow directions is VITAL.

3. Help them discover that some directions are general. (e.g., arrange the chairs in a circle). Others must be followed precisely (e.g., science experience) and still others may be altered (e.g., directions for games).

4. Write directions on or below students' reading level.

   James Olsen makes the point that directions are not especially interesting to read. They are tools we use to get certain kinds of behaviors. Keep them short and to the point.

   Put them in time sequence--First you----Second----.

III. Directions were Given Poorly

Basically there appears to be four forms for giving directions.

1. Oral. This form is excellent for young children and probably the most frequently used in adult life but usually accompanied by diagrams (e.g., how to thread a projector), or pictorial illustrations (e.g., drawing a map while talking). In oral directions it is best to keep to three steps if the task is new.

   Have you ever stopped at a service station to ask directions only to be told to go out that street for two blocks then turn right, go to the "Pepsi Cola Plant" and then----. If you know little or nothing about the area, what do you do? Usually follow first three steps and then stop and get three more steps, etc.

One other point to keep in mind is that the oral form frequently allows interaction which helps in clarification.

2. Written Directions

·Must be precise
·Requires reading comprehension
·Are good because they allow student to look back, reaffirm accuracy, and reread next step
·Are frequently specific type.

Teach your students these steps in following written directions.

READ (All the way through)
VISUALIZE (What is goal? What are the steps?)
REREAD (If problem is with visualization, double check by rereading.)
ASK (Ask questions to clarify, if needed.)
CHECK (Did you reach goal?)

There is an excellent article in Reading Teacher, March 1977, "Writing Directions Children Can Read" for helping teachers and others write clear directions. Pikulski suggests that we:

-Use simple sentence
-Avoid use of pronouns (These are frequently confusing so would be better to repeat nouns.)
-Use words that tell specifically what is to be done (Circle rather than select; write rather than give.)
-Use color or underlining for emphasis, but do so sparingly.
-Provide illustrations or examples (Do one or two with the students.)
-Know children's levels of reading.

3. Demonstration. These are frequently combined with oral and sometimes with written.

A. Good for young children as this form helps to overcome passive listening.
B. Necessary for learning to use and/or operate some objects (e.g., bike, car).
C. When combined with other forms provides for children who learn best by ways other than reading.

4. Pictorial Representation
These are frequently used in road signs, to identify rest areas, etc. However, there are ways to use these in the class most effectively.

IV. Students Expect to Have Directions Repeated

1. We've let ourselves slip into this habit and somehow we must encourage students to become responsible for listening, reading and understanding directions when they are first given.

2. If you have the habit of repeating directions, you must let students know that the rules have changed--no longer will directions be given and explained over and over.

3. Give the directions as close to the activity as possible. Recently, I was in a classroom and heard these oral directions being given:

   "After this class is over you are to go to the auditorium. After which you will be dismissed and are expected to go to your next class for which you should be no more than 15 minutes late. However, before leaving this class, you should hand in last night's homework by folding your paper. . ."

   It would have been better to begin with immediate directions:

   "Fold your paper and write your name on the outside . . ." When the immediate directions are completed then give delayed directions.

   If complicated, delayed directions (those that won't be followed for several hours or days) are given orally, you need to have a written back up (e.g., put steps on the board or tape the directions being given) so that students can review by listening to the tape.

SUMMARY

1. Set the stage (Get the children ready to listen.)
2. Give specific help (Do they know the vocabulary? Are the steps clearly identified?)
3. Use appropriate form or combination of forms.

   ORAL
   WRITTEN
   DEMONSTRATION
   PICTORIAL REPRESENTATION

4. Avoid repeating directions
5. If delayed directions are given, be certain to have some sort of back up to help refresh the students' memory.

Giving clear directions is a necessary skill if we want to have a well organized classroom. From childhood through adult life we give directions and are called on to follow directions. Hopefully, this information will help you realize the importance of these skills and give you some ideas on how to improve your ability to give clear directions and help your students follow directions carefully.

References

Esposito, Barbara N. "How to Mark a (Lumpy) Peanut Butter Sandwich." Teacher 91 (November, 1973): 1945-1946+.

Hunter, Madeline. "There's An Art to Giving Directions." Instructor 81 (March, 1972): 70-81.

"The Kind of Directions That Work." Instructor 83 (December, 1973): 12.

Johnson, Merrill. "Putting It All Together." Teacher 95 (February, 1978): 107-109.

Markman, Ellen M. "Realizing That You Don't Understand: A Preliminary Investigation." Child Development 48 (September, 1977): 986-992.

Newcastle, Helen. "Children's Problems with Written Directions." The Reading Teacher 28 (December, 1974): 292-294.

Pikulski, John J., & Jones, Margaret. "Writing Directions Children Can Read." The Reading Teacher 30 (March, 1977): 598-602.

Towery, Barbara M. "Your Horoscope Predicts: You Can Teach Student to Follow Directions." Journal of Reading 19 (May, 1976): 653-659.

Tutolo, Daniel. "Attention: Necessary Aspect of Listening." Language Arts 56 (January, 1979): 34-37.